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The History Of Interior Decoration

by Rossiter Howard

Day by day as we are watching the elaborately mechanized systems of the nineteenth century disintegrate, or melt in the heat of passionate desire for change, as we feel civilization in a state of flux, with many still unmolten fragments of the old systems floating about, we art students must all of us be eagerly watching for forms expressive of the new epoch; for we are in the habit of reading the drama of world history through the things which man has made for his pleasure—his houses, furniture, pictures, temples. History to us is not a line extending backward into a distant past, but is rather a sphere into which all of the past is rolled, and we in the center of it have acquaintances in all epochs who tell us how the ball grew.

How is it with our students? Are geology, archaeology, history, literature, music, art, physics and economics united as threads in the tissue that has been woven and which we are still weaving? Or have the teachers of these things been so keen about their own subjects that they have kept them unrelated to each other, and therefore unrelated to the lives of the students? Such compartment education is going out of fashion in our public schools, and art teachers more than any others can help to bring about a more vital organization of knowledge in the colleges.

The branch of art history that more than any other offers opportunity to make vivid the history of the race is the history of man's habitations and their furnishings. And this subject has another great advantage—it touches our personal life more closely than any other and establishes an aesthetic connection between the student and his surroundings, making conscious his reactions and intensifying them.

The Roman house is a conspicuous example. It interprets the Roman family so racily that the student may have familiar intercourse with the people of the time, especially if he may read a bit of the literature which his ancient friends read, and enter into their public problems. He may relate the Roman not only to the past, but to the future, and see a glimpse of his descendants in the houses of Spain and Italy and the furnishings of the Renaissance and the French Empire. If he does these things while he is studying the Roman house, he will find it of vastly more importance and interest than he will if he takes each thing only in its chronological place; he can make the Roman house for the time being the center of his consciousness, reaching out not only backward but forward and in all directions to the contemporary countries touched by the Roman. More than that, he can carry the Roman problem of living into his own town, and see if his people in New England or Minnesota have solved the problems as satisfactorily, especially those of intimate private life in the outdoor part of the home.

Studied in that way the history of the home performs the two great functions of art history. On the one hand it gives the student a view of the human race as a stupendous organism growing out of an infinitely distant past into an infinite future, a vast drama with quite clearly defined acts, each in its own peculiar mood but all having similar dramatic tendencies and all made of the same stuff that we see around us today in the turmoil of changing scenery and costumes for a new act. On the other hand it stimulates his reactions to his own surroundings, clarifying his vision, refining his tastes, and improving the quality of our building and manufactures through creating a desire for certain good things which our ancestors have had.

You will say that this is a large order, and impossible to execute except very superficially. It is. But I want to suggest that there are two categories of superficiality. It is not only possible but usual for a college teacher to give his class a considerable knowledge of a restricted subject, even a satisfactorily deep

knowledge, so that the class can pass a stiff examination, and then send out his students with scarcely any of that knowledge really under the skin, a part of the living thought of them. The course was not superficial; the effect on the student was tragically so. If a student should not know an *impluvium* from a *cucina* but felt a friendliness for the Roman family, with its love of authentic imitations of antiques and its vast influence on the later life of Europe, and went home to see how he could arrange his living room and backyard to gain a bit of the old Roman's privacy with his flowers and fountains—then the result of the course would be of a less harmful type of superficiality than the academic.

The most difficult obstacle I have found to be not the number of contacts necessary for the purposes I have suggested—though that is difficult enough, in all conscience—but the lack of immediate acquaintance on the part of the students with actual objects discussed. When a student speaks of a Gothic chest in mahogany, the conclusion is not merely that he has not sufficiently read his textbook; rather it is that when he did read it, he did not see and feel with mental eye and hand the thing he was reading of. Any study of furniture will remain academic and lifeless unless the students may see and feel things similar to those they are studying. In the matter of architecture and gardens, the student may see about him actual stone and flowers, even actual examples of columns and arches; so that lantern slides will give him some sort of feeling of the buildings and grounds. Lantern slides are better than plates, for they make one look up at vaultings, etc., and give a certain effect of scale. But furniture and textiles are deceiving in pictures. If there is an adequate museum in the city, this difficulty of realization may readily be overcome; but without a museum there is no way out but through exhibitions.

These entail a gread deal of labor and require a certain courage to divert energy from textbook information; but for effective education better less information in the head—it will soon be forgotten anyway—and more realization of eye and hand, for the experience of sight

and touch becomes a permanent part of the student. Certainly it will be impossible to have enough exhibitions in any year to cover the whole subject, and it will usually be impossible to reconstruct classical, Gothic or Renaissance rooms. The earlier periods will have to be taught by illustrations, books and lectures; but from the seventeenth century down there is enough material in most towns, a few antique specimens and many modern reproductions more or less accurate, to make possible effective exhibitions which will show the students actual objects, with their proper textures and colors.

There is no need of elaborate installation or great expense. If no small hall is available, even a class room may be made effective. If the room is small, we can take one period at a time, and it is not even necessary to separate dining room from living room, for the furniture can be grouped according to function. Perhaps a more lively sense of the individual character of the several centuries is given by showing them at once, and separating them by screens—simple framework eight feet high and as long as needed, filled with "compo board" and held upright by crosspieces nailed to the bottom. There is almost everywhere an abundance of early nineteenth century furniture, showing the effect of the French Empire and reflecting ancient Rome. And there is a great deal of "Colonial" furniture, which brought eighteenth century traditions of Europe into the first years of the nineteenth century in this country. In the larger cities there is also a good deal of seventeenth century oak and walnut in the homes of wealthy men who are ready enough to lend it for exhibition.

Beautiful reproductions of ancient hangings are made today by American manufacturers, who are glad to lend them for exhibition. These can be used decoratively, in connection with imaginary doors and windows. It is not necessary to tempt the public to hypercriticism by trying to make openings illusionistic; a frank acceptance of limitations disarms such criticism, and leaves the way clear for enjoyment of the actual effect.

Paintings of the periods, not necessarily of the first class, are to be found in most cities; but if they are not available, old prints are not difficult to find; and failing those, reproductions of characteristic works of the periods are always to be had for the asking, if they are offered for sale.

Old china and silverware are never lacking, and these with ancient laces and other decorative objects may be grouped with the things of their own period.

Even the Italian Renaissance is not impossible to illustrate with a degree of vitality far in excess of books and plates, if one will but seek through the homes and stores and borrow somewhat from manufacturers of modern reproductions.

Please do not think that I am speaking from experience in a museum. I have seen such exhibitions in a little town on the prairie of South Dakota, and I received a letter only a few days ago from the same town saying that the Art Club was arranging another such right now. Even in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, many of our best exhibits have been borrowed from homes in the town; and last summer we had an exhibition of furniture, showing ancient and modern placed side by side for comparison, most of it borrowed from homes, from manufacturers, and from department stores. It required work, but it was worth it, for we have not yet ceased to hear of it from all over the country. Yet it was nothing but what most of you could accomplish, in some scale, in your own towns. It seems to me beyond argument that the effect of such exhibitions on the student is of more permanent value than a great deal of very forgetable art history.

A large number of people will visit such exhibitions without seeing them. The things by themselves will not function to any great extent, they need the academic knowledge which is so useless by itself. The students themselves will see and feel, particularly if they are required to write critically of the exhibition or of something in it; but the public will need additional stimulus. This may be given partly by gallery talks, and partly by adequate labeling. It is not enough to in-

dicate what each object is, and give its provenance and date; there should be some sentence to stimulate attention to the object. Sometimes the label may suggest derivation of design, sometimes influence of some other epoch or nation, sometimes it may call attention to the finish; but almost always it will prove most stimulating if it suggests a comparison of some sort with some other object in the collection.

Usually the first effect of an acquaintance with the art of the past is to raise a desire for examples of the early art or for authentic reproductions of them; but such a course as this ought to show the futility of attempting any exact repetition of antiquity, for eclecticism is seen to be a characteristic of decadence, and each age has its own qualities which bloom in forms of its own, developing out of earlier forms, and the march of civilization is only hindered when artist turns archaeologist. But we can aim to give the student a vision of the unity of history, in which he is an actor, give him pleasant acquaintances in many ages along the way, and develop within him a sensibility to the beauty, or lack of it, in his own surroundings.